DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 640 FL 001 870

AUTHOR Cor, Laurence W.
TITLE Humanizing Language Study.
INSTITUTION American Association of Teachers of French.
PUB DATE May 67
NOTE 6p.; Revision of an address delivered to the Idaho Foreign Language Teacher's Association, April 22-23, 1966
JOURNAL CIT French Review; v40 n6 p817-822 May 1967

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Audiolingual Methods, Communication (Thought Transfer), Dropout Prevention, Educational Objectives, Educational Technology, *Humanism, Humanities, Humanities Instruction, Identification (Psychological), Instructional Program Divisions, *Language Instruction, *Modern Languages, *Psychological Needs, Second Language Learning, Self Concept, *Student Attitudes, Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The knowledge explosion, the growth of technology, and the development of new teaching methodologies seem to the author to have led to a sense of unrelatedness, insignificance, and a loss of personal identity. The implications of this position for language teachers are viewed in terms of communication and motivation. Weaknesses of the scientific, linguistic approach to language instruction are seen in relation to the larger goals of the teacher--the humanizing of language study. (RL)

ED040640

From: The French Review; Vol. 40, No. 6, May 1967

Humanizing Language Study*

by Laurence W. Cor

AS LANGUAGE TEACHERS we are all grateful for the benefits we have received in the past few years: the support of the public and of our administrators; invaluable help from the U. S. Office of Education; the contributions of brilliant linguists; a clear-cut methodology for the language classroom; and audio-visual aids of every kind.

Yet, despite our good fortune, there are still shadows in the picture. For example, there is the danger that this wealth of new materials, methods, techniques, and machines—and our eagerness to possess and master them—may obscure from our view some basic needs of students in the classroom. We may be losing sight of the problems faced by those attempting the study of a second language.

The qualities of speed, economy, efficiency, thoroughness are all integrated in the scientific, linguistic approach. But these are qualities we associate more easily with machines. In our desire to teach a language so as to obtain the best results in a minimum of time, it is possible that our approach may become depersonalized, and indifferent to the sensibilities of the learner.

Teaching a language is our profession. It is what we know best how to do. Yet even in what we know best, there is always the element of the unknown. With particular reference to our own work, I think we are not aware of what the students expect of us. We are tending to neglect our role as *teachers*. We must be more than instructors or technicians in an isolated subject. In other words, we must humanize the teaching and the learning of a foreign language. To be more explicit, we must become aware of students as emotional human beings, motivate them, establish a feeling of real communication in the classroom, and inspire a love of language for itself.

To qualify as genuine teachers, we have, first of all, the obligation to be considerate of the student in the foreign language class. For example, what is simple and routine to us, who have already studied the language, may be

* Revision of an address delivered before the Idaho Foreign Language Teacher's Association, April 22–23, 1966.

FL001 870

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

© "PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY FRENCH Review

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

painfully complex to the student. Confronted with a seemingly unintelligible system of sounds, patterns, and structures, he often suffers from nervousness, embarrassment, and anxiety. In the beginning, and sometimes long thereafter, even a language like French, or German, may constitute a "shock" language, so far as the student is concerned.

It is a paradox that, in a language class, a student is deprived of a means of complete communication. In other classes, language is available for support, defense, self-expression, retention, comments, questions; also as a tool of enquiry, and as a frame of reference. Contrast this with the poverty of personal communication in the foreign language class, where so much activity is centered on rote learning, repetition, and structural drill.

To be relatively mute and dumb is one thing. To be dependent on aural signals alone imposes another strain. Reliance on aural memory is no longer characteristic of our Western civilization. Having the printed page, the film, the tape recorder, we inevitably resort to the visual image or playback for purposes of recall and retention. It is natural, then, that the dependence on aural retention is disconcerting—not to say, frustrating—to our modern students. It has been stated that about seven syllables is the limit for remembering the reproduction of sounds. If we agree, no more need be said as to what a problem aural retention poses for the average student.

What I have been saying is that a language class can give rise to feelings of alienation and insecurity, which certainly do not provide the optimum conditions for learning. In an article in the *French Review*,[1] Gertrude Moskowitz cites some typical reactions of college students. There is the one who "freezes" when he has to say something in French class. Another: "My stomach is tied in knots." Another: "I can't speak because I'm tense." "I can't learn because I'm nervous." Others feel the same, but do not verbalize.

Another object of concern to the dedicated teacher is the matter of motivation. There is a strong emotional element in learning. Indeed, there must be a drive, a hunger, to learn. Our behaviorist psychologists have postulated certain theories of learning by observing the reactions of animals to stimuli. In the Skinner Box, for example, the rats learn to operate a lever, and are thereby rewarded with more food pellets. They are motivated through hunger. They learn because they are deprived of food. But, on a comparable basis, do our students feel deprived of French, Spanish, German, Hottentot, or Swahili? I raise this question merely to make a point. Motivation is not intrinsic to the language under study.

In programmed learning, in current methodology, and in the various

[1] "The Fearsome Foreign Language Hour," *French Review*, May 1965, 781–786.

laboratory procedures, there is always the underlying assumption that the student is eager to learn. Too often that is not the case. If the student is passive, if he does not cooperate fully, all the carefully prepared devices and procedures for learning yield no worthwhile results. The indifferent student gains little from "rewards," drills, mimicry or memorization if he simply goes through the motions while, in his own mind, he is building castles in Spain.

The unmotivated student, the one who takes language as a requirement, feels that overlearning, automatic response, saturation practice, are a waste of time. I submit that he feels this way because he is totally ignorant of the rationale of the linguistic, scientific approach. While we, as instructors, know the virtues of this method, an alarming number of students think of it in only derogatory terms. So let us take the time to inform our classes of the nature of language learning. If a student learns how any subject is learned, and—better yet—how any subject is mastered, and if he knows what a reward his patient effort and attention will produce in the course of time, it is certain his interest will intensify. After all, *how* we learn is fascinating to any mind, regardless of what is being learned.

What I would like to consider next is the teacher-student relationship in the language class. In the final analysis, the object of study is but a pretext for a priceless experience in communication. Unless we are on our guard, our role may become exclusively that of instructors, rather than teachers; or inculcating material for playback, rather than eliciting personal reactions and responses. Over-reliance on manuals, technology, and prefabricated materials results in limited and controlled expression on the part of the student.

We cannot expect young minds merely to absorb passively. Students feel the need to express their own ideas, to react to real life situations. Too often in textbooks, they meet with the abstract, the contrived, and the artificial. Current teaching methods emphasize the importance of learning the structure of the language, and rightfully so. But a response to life as the student actually perceives and feels it—pleasure, fun, frustration, or disappointment—is too confined by the rigorous discipline of a systematic method.

The concentration on structure underplays the lexical meanings of words. Too often they are referred to as "bricks" or "stones." Words have life. A word can almost resume a way of life, even a destiny. We have only to remember what a word like "honor" means to the Spanish, "Jansenism" to the French, or "space" to us. Only words, rich with meaning, can awaken and stimulate the mind.

The lack of genuine communication slowly erodes the presence of the teacher. The language laboratory, films, tapes, teaching machines, the

electro-magnetic blackboard are much-to-be-desired aids and substitutes. The fact remains that the voice of the teacher is heard less and less. And more and more the student is hearing other voices in other rooms. The new development offers the tremendous advantage of bringing the outside world into the classroom and enriching the materials for study. Still the time and occasion for true communication between student and teacher is diminished.

My final comment on humanizing language study concerns the value of literature to the language student. Now and then there appear in the various journals statements implying that literature should be the concern of specialists. The gist of the argument seems to be that preoccupation with literary masterpieces interferes with the more practical and useful study of a foreign tongue. No one can question that knowing the four skills of a foreign language constitutes not only a social grace but also an indispensable means of serving science, business, government, industry, tourism, and international relations. Written language has a special application in that it serves as a recorder of knowledge: scientific and sociological facts, observations, information. All this we may apply to our own needs and interests, as well as to those of the foreign people concerned.

Alongside the usefulness and practicality of language conceived only as a communicative medium, the study of Molière, Cervantes, or Goethe might seem an esoteric exercise. After all, literature is created by the genius, by the deviant from the social norm. It is not the work of the informant, but the transformant—the one who deforms everyday reality into an intensely personal vision.

There are two aspects of language that I wish to juxtapose and they are most easily defined by an answer that is made to a familiar question: if you were marooned on a desert island, what book would you want to have available? Many would say the Bible or Shakespeare. One man said, *How to Build a Boat*. One answer labels language as literature; the other, language as knowledge.

In the last twenty-five years, we have witnessed the rise of science and the decline of the humanities. Much as we need knowledge, we need learning more. Despite the knowledge explosion, we still suffer from a sense of unrelatedness, insignificance, and a lack of personal identification. As technology develops, we must take up the issue of man's quest for spiritual growth. We must train the imagination to fight for the sanity and dignity of mankind. The humane aspect of language study must not be lost.

Science deals with the known, and is constantly pushing back the frontiers of the unknown. But in the study of literature, we see how man confronts the unknown. To a surprising extent, the universal cry underlying

drama, fiction, and poetry is, in essence: "I did not foresee what has come to pass."

Nowadays the stimulus and response concept of learning predicates language as something you do; language is behavior. But what lies between stimulus and response? Nothing less than human thought and consciousness of which language is the vehicle. Language is, in the words of Paul Hazard, "both the memory and the cult of desperate shouts, songs of love, hymns of hope, epics, comedies, dramas which . . . geniuses have scattered in space and time." [2]

To illustrate the difference between knowledge and literature, I turn to a poem by Victor Hugo. I am making use of the words in only two lines and, to make my point, I withhold some of the words until the end. Some words allude to everyday, observable, "scientific" reality:

Puisque j'ai vu tomber dans l'onde
Une feuille de rose

So far, we might consider this simply as an observation, something that might occur in a typical report. By the addition of a few words here and there the poet transforms this segment of reality, humanizes an observation, and gives a sense of personal experience:

Puisque j'ai vu tomber dans l'onde de ma vie
Une feuille de rose arrachée à tes jours

In my discussion of humanizing language study I have been calling attention to certain requirements that must be fulfilled if this process is to be realized. I have submitted problems, conflicting ideas—and no solutions. But somehow, in some way, each of us, in line with his talents and abilities, must make an effort to reconcile the multiple demands on the time and effort we invest in teaching a language. As teachers, we are asked to be technicians, instructors and educators. Perhaps many, if not all, difficulties can be resolved if we have a strong sense of our vocation, of our lifework.

We have to live with our conflicting ideas, methods, objectives and goals. It is not much of a solution to know that. The real question is: what do we live *from*? In reply I adapt an answer proposed by Ortega y Gasset.

We live *from* our vocation as teachers. Ideas and trends come and go, but the imperatives of our profession remain constant. Our immediate concern is to teach the four skills. Our ultimate concern is to educate in

[2] "Le Professeur de français," *French Review*, February 1941, 277-283; cited by Georges R. Joyaux in "Foreign Languages and the Humanities," *Modern Language Journal*, February 1965, 105.

the larger sense. Ortega says: "We have, no doubt, increasingly to live with ideas, but we must stop living *from* our ideas, and learn to live *from* our inexorable destiny.[3]

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

[3] José Ortega y Gasset, "In Search of Goethe from Within," *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture*, trans. W. R. Trask (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books), p. 155.